

STATE OF CONNECTICUT

# Wilderness School News

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1

APRIL 15, 2011

## Director's News

### The Wilderness School Emerges From the Winter of 2011 (and a snowy April Fool's Day joke)



By Dave Czaja, Director

It is April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011, and there are several inches of fresh snow across the grounds of the Wilderness School, a parting gift (and April Fools Day joke) from the winter of 2011.

Just three days ago our first spring students arrived and were accompanied by warm sunshine and many other welcome signs of spring.

But do not be fooled — much evidence remains of Connecticut's second snowiest winter on state record. In fact, our canoe trailers are still snowbound, leaving us to wonder if they will be free when our water activities begin. Some things, I suppose, take time.

For the record, eighty-six brave students and twenty three referring agency staff joined the four permanent staff of the Wilderness School on winter adventures.

As with all Wilderness School courses, the numbers only provide a starting point for the stories remaining to be told of outstanding efforts, and humorous occasions, from our winter programs.

Ironically, at times the snow was too deep to go cross country skiing in the forests around our base camp in East Hartland. Bonnie Sterpka, Wilderness School Enrollment Coordinator, even disappeared from view, momentarily of course, into powder snow over three feet deep while demonstrating how to fall down and get up on skis.

Wilderness School students also experienced what is to be expected from

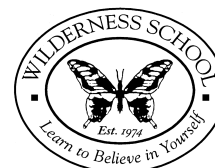


our winter challenges -- views from mountain tops, quiet forests in deep winter sleep, fast trips down woodland trails on cross country skis and great efforts breaking trail in thigh deep snow.

Making camp in 5 degree weather requires commitment and concern for your fellow group members. Breaking camp the next morning? How about great heart and perseverance. With both new skills and old lessons to practice, many youth attending a course this winter pushed themselves to grow in new ways.

Some would say this is almost by itself why we have a Wilderness School.

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For our summer schedule and to learn more about Wilderness School Programs in collaboration with DCF Prevention Services, CYSA and others, please visit the program webpage at <http://www.ct.gov/DCF> and go to DCF Programs and Services.

For Enrollment information contact Bonnie at: [bonnie.sterpka@ct.gov](mailto:bonnie.sterpka@ct.gov)

## Congratulations!

To Anthony K. And Michelle S.

for earning the 2011 NOLS Scholarships!

This summer Anthony and Michelle will spend 28 days on backpacking courses in Wyoming and Alaska respectively. We're so excited for you! Well done!

## ***"A Challenge in the Wilderness"***

**Yadira Duran, DCF Social Work Supervisor**

Five social workers from the Milford Area Office were challenged to identify one youth on their caseload to spend the day at the Wilderness School and to participate in a winter sport. They thought long and hard about who they wanted their partner to be and together ventured off with their supervisor on what turned out to be one of the most memorable days at work—ever. Too often our memories of work are surrounded by trauma and sadness, but this day had a lot more than that in store.

On the sunny, bright morning of January 20, 2011, all eleven of them ventured out to the Wilderness School. Not knowing much of what the day was going to be like, or how far the school was, they packed grocery bags full of lunch and spent the ride to the Wilderness School talking about who had ever been snow shoeing or even been out in the snow before (shoveling snow did not count!!). And this is when the bonding started.

We unpacked lunch and each one of us carefully made sandwiches to our liking. We changed into snow gear offered by the school, learned how to take care of ourselves in the cold, and headed out cross country skiing. Bonnie and Kim assured us the snow was perfect for our outdoor adventure, and it was, even though what we really had was ice and managing the skis was not as easy as they anticipated. Needless to say, everyone had a close encounter with the snow/ice, but it made for the rest of us still standing to laugh and cheer them on as they tried to get back up.

All in all, the experience allowed the adolescents to see the other side of their workers, as one of them said. It was a creative way to bring workers and adolescents together to build rapport. It allowed one of the apprehensive adolescents to look at the brighter side of things and enjoy herself. Overall, it was amazing to see everyone smile and pitch in. It far exceeded our expectations, and the adolescents are still talking about it.

Yadira works in the Milford DCF Office and is a member of the Wilderness School Advisory Board.



Life isn't about waiting  
for the storm to pass,  
It's about learning to  
dance in the rain  
(or play in the snow), as I see it)

## **WHAT'S NEW FOR SPRING**

On March 29, 2011, Wilderness School's Juvenile Diversion courses, in collaboration with Hartford's Village for Children and Families, kicked off the spring season. This represents a very early start to springtime programs (see above SNOW), and also marks our commitment to begin 2011 courses early enough for Hartford youth to attend during their spring school vacation.

Several more collaborative Diversion courses (featuring our partnership with youth service bureaus statewide) are scheduled and ready to go, as are other prevention courses serving youth involved with DCF Family With Service Needs efforts. Lest we forget, DCF adolescents and their social workers have enrolled for rock climbing programs in droves; we are currently doubling up days as we speak. Great work, regional office staff.



## **8-Day Expedition for Expelled Students**

The Wilderness School has also joined with Connecticut youth service bureaus to create a pilot 8-Day Expedition in May for students expelled from school. This program is designed to support youth transitioning back to school from homebound education. Quite honestly, the Wilderness School staff cannot wait for this course to arrive, especially as we see the enthusiasm building among our community partners.



**THANKS TO**  
**RUDY!**

DCF's Rudy Brooks gets a Wilderness School appreciation for his great support since July 2009, at which time we were assigned to the DCF Prevention Services team. With his help, several new initiatives came into play and as a result there are now many more youth participating in Wilderness School programs.



## Winter 2011 Follow Up Program Report: What Do You Know? Too Much Snow!

Our first scheduled Winter Follow Up date on January 8 was postponed due to... too much snow! Areas of central CT received upwards of 16" of new white stuff! Our make-up date, January 29, however, was just right, though the extreme powder made it difficult to get up after snowy head and butt plants! We had a great turnout of 11 students, who not only learned the basics of cross country skiing (on our almost new skis), but also had noticeably developed skills by the day's end. I think everyone probably slept very well that night, with white snowflakes dancing in their heads!



The next Follow Up course, February 19-20, was an overnight camping, skiing, and hiking trip based at Ethan Allen camping area in Mohawk State Forest. Well, the mosquitoes were in hibernation, but the wind was not! It howled the entire time we were there, adding a sense of wildness to the sunny, cold skies. Sleeping out overnight and then getting up with a temperature of 5° certainly challenged the four hardy students (and two "older" instructors)! Arriving at the camp after lunch, the picnic table had to be dug out, tents pitched into and onto the icy crusted snow, and snacks devoured to power the next activity...cross country skiing on ice! It really challenged all of our abilities. The wind continued to howl, so warm drinks, hot food, and an inviting camp fire warmed the souls of all of us until well after dark.

Our second day dawned bright, cold, and not so windy, but the encrusted snow had survived the night. Searching for a reasonable place to ski proved impossible, so after breaking camp, we drove to Barkhamsted where the group hiked to the Chaugham's Lookout overlook in Riverton, CT, where a warm sun and lunch eased the disappointment of not being able to ski. The course ended late that day with goodbyes and returns to the in-

venting "comforts of home". Congratulations to Jon, Sal, Andrew, and Brian for a job well done challenging themselves in the heart of winter. And not to be forgotten, we missed you Anthony after your early departure on Saturday due to a sudden onset of stomach distress!



The last Follow Up course was held March 5 at Sleeping Giant State Park in Hamden. Yes, there was still snow on the ground at the Wilderness School, and yes, it was still ice encrusted. Thus, our annual winter peak climb at the Giant offered the opportunity to summit a dramatic peak with just enough snow and ice to require us to use our crampons (iron spikes for our boots) and to ascend some of its steepest ledges that lead to the Giant's head! Yes, when viewed from the distant north and south, this mountain range looks like a Giant enjoying a nap! We ascended the Forehead, slipped and slid down his Chin and Neck, and made a gallant ascent of his Chest to a stone tower that afforded a 360° view of southern Connecticut and even further south to Long Island, NY. During all of this exploring, we searched for Geocaches and Letterboxes, finding two of many that were indicated on our maps. Perhaps they are buried in the snow pockets and ledges that guard the Giant's secrets.

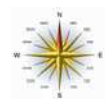
All in all, we had great days out this winter with our Follow Up students! We enjoyed seeing all of you challenging yourself in the cold of winter, and working on goals that will make you stronger as the year carries on. See you all in the spring!



Winter Follow Up Students: Dustin R., Jon K., Natalia G., Justin B., Devon S., Nicole M., Jeremy N., Anthony K., Andrew L., Sal P., Rojo P., Brian S., and Peter Z.

Instructors: Don, Kim, and Kenny!

**Wilderness School Phone Numbers**  
**(860) 653-8059 or**  
**(800) 273-2293**



## ***Finding Your Way...Wilderness School Style***

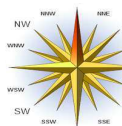
### An Adventure Celebrating Black History Month

By Bonnie Sterpka, Enrollment Coordinator

This past February, several DCF Prevention Services youth participated in a Wilderness School adventure during the February vacation week. The course was held in New Haven at West Rock Ridge State Park. The metaphor for the day was "Finding Your Way," in celebration of Black History Month. The group assembled at the entrance to the park, dressed in Wilderness School clothing and, after reviewing our map, we headed off on our journey..

Discussions focused on what it might have been like for a black slave to seek freedom through the Underground Railroad in the 1800's, and also highlighted New Haven's significance during this time period. William Lanson, a free black man, became a wealthy business man, and owned lots of property at a time when few had these opportunities. He not only rented out property to other black people experiencing newly found freedom, but he also employed them and built Long Wharf into a thriving shipping area. He was a talented mason and engineer and used his talent to build the wharf which greatly increased opportunities for New Haven!

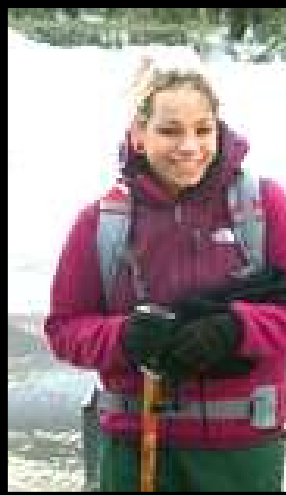
During the day we "found our way" to a beautiful view point where we could see all of New Haven, including the Long Wharf area. After a picnic lunch in the snow, participants were eager to experience a form of travel more akin to travel on the Underground Railroad — hiking off the trail. Our group had the benefit of a compass, and we learned about orienting a map as well as shooting compass bearings through the forest (and a lot of underbrush!). Thus, we were able to think more about black slaves finding their way north through the wilderness of America in the 1800's; who hiked on and off trail, using the sun or moon as reference points, and who used the resources within themselves to succeed.



The experience led to our final summary of the day's experience, regarding leadership. At times individuals become leaders simply because others are hesitant to step forward. Crew members identified with this feeling of having the responsibility to keep the group on track, rather than following someone else's path!

Dave and I thoroughly enjoyed this day! They were excellent leaders and eager participants. Thanks to all who came out and to DCF Prevention Social Workers for their support in creating this experience!

## **Faces from the Winter....** thanks to all we who came out to





# A Lucky Chance Reconnection



By: Kim Thorne-Kaunelis

Do you believe in coincidences, fate, or karma? Well how about this mentoring friendship? Two years ago Melisa M., graduated from a 20-Day Wilderness School Expedition where she first met one of her instructors, Joanna Lilley. Together they traveled over many hiking and canoeing miles, shared the ups and downs of being in the woods for 20-days, and bonded through a shared experience. After graduation, crews generally do not see each other as a whole group again. And often, instructors do not cross paths with their students again. Although, some meet again in Follow-Up programs, and some work at maintaining course friendships, others move on to new places and new adventures.

As for how Melisa and Joanna reconnected,

well that a story in itself. Melisa returned home after her course, where she now lives in Torrington and is a senior at Oliver Wolcott Technical High School. She plays on her school soccer team, is active in her trade of choice; the hair Salon and Spa field and she is excited to obtain her driver's license.

Although Melisa does not consider herself the most outdoorsy or a wilderness lover, she did state that she saw value in her experience with the Wilderness School and she even added "and now I know how to tie a knot!" When I spoke to Melisa

about how she became a mentee, she recalled filling out a survey for her life skills teacher and how she had to describe things she likes to do and her overall interests. Soon after she was paired up with her mentor.

Joanna's journey, following her 20-Day experience with Melisa, involved traveling to see family, friends, and coordinating a canyon hike in the spring, just before returning to the Wilderness School in 2010 to instruct again. During her second summer with us, she accepted a full time teaching position with the Horace Mann School John Dorr Nature Lab in Washington Depot, Connecticut. After about two

months at her new job Joanna called to ask about how to become a mentor. After a few phone calls Joanna was soon on a list waiting for a mentee.

It wasn't long before she heard Melisa's name and she sighed in amazement with the good fortune of re-uniting with Melisa a year and a half after their Wilderness School experience.

Their mentor/mentee relationship has been great for both of them. They have gone to the movies, played Tuesday night soccer, cooked, baked, talked, teased and listened. They truly rekindled a friendship and

what Melisa has said she likes most is having someone to talk to. She added "it is great to get out and do some of the things I want to do." And she also added that she thinks Joanna just likes to hang out with teenagers, and to be able to be more kid-like herself, having more fun and not being so serious.

For more information of the DCF Mentoring Program, please call **1 800 KID HERO** or go to the following link: <http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=3481&Q=413426>



## Thank You Todd Christopher!

The Wilderness School would like to give Todd Christopher, of the Farmington Valley Health District, a **HUGE THANK YOU** for helping us put on an **OUTSTANDING** course for our Follow Up students: The **1st Annual Wilderness Chef's Challenge**. He led with passion and kindness, and the students and staff left the weekend feeling inspired and exhausted! And a special thanks also to the students who came out and exceeded our expectations with their focus, hard work, positivity, teamwork, and tremendous cooking and Initiative-building skills!



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